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TAGS: [PREF](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KS](#) [KN](#)
SUBJECT: ROK EXPRESSES CONCERNS ABOUT USG REFUGEE STRATEGY

REF: A. STATE 04712

[1](#)B. SEOUL 155
[1](#)C. SEOUL 166

Classified By: POL M/C Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b), (d).

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

[1](#)1. (C) In a February 8 meeting with POL M/C, MOFAT DG Kim Won-soo opined it would be premature to approach third countries about a U.S. proposal (ref A) on North Korean refugees until there was a clear case of a North Korean being potentially eligible for resettlement to the United States. ROKG officials were concerned that consultations at this time with host governments could seriously undermine informal procedures that have helped facilitate the movement of North Koreans to the South. Underscoring the importance of a role for UNHCR, Kim suggested that U.S. and UNHCR officials hold bilateral talks before the next round of U.S.-ROKG discussions. Kim stressed that his remarks were preliminary and not a formal ROK response to our ref A proposal to process refugees for the United States in third countries. At a minimum, however, it now seems unlikely Seoul will actively support our initiative. The ROKG is uncomfortable with the prospect of North Korean refugees proceeding to the United States, especially if there appears to be a South Korean role, as it fears the publicity that is likely to accompany American acceptance of a few North Koreans could negatively affect its own policy and procedure on refugee resettlement. END COMMENT AND SUMMARY.

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ROKG: DON'T ROCK THE BOAT

[1](#)2. (C) During a lunch meeting on February 8, Kim Won-soo, MOFAT Director-General for Policy Planning, said the ROKG was still examining the U.S. proposal on North Korean refugees (reftels), but his initial take was that it was premature to approach third countries until we were able to present them with a North Korean with a clear case for admission to the United States. Approaching these countries now might undermine the ROKG's current program and jeopardize cooperation between host governments and South Korean officials, which would complicate the ability of North Korean refugees to secure asylum.

[1](#)3. (C) DG Kim said that Mongolia, for example, was currently the ROKG's most important route for the movement of North

Koreans to South Korea, and Seoul had to protect this arrangement. Last year the ROK accepted 1,386 North Koreans, of whom some 400-500 came to South Korea via Mongolia, thanks to an informal understanding between South Korean and Mongolian authorities. ROKG officials paid expenses to shelter North Koreans in Mongolia while they were preparing for onward movement to South Korea. Kim said the North Koreans were fed, clothed, and housed until they could be flown directly from Mongolia to South Korea on commercial aircraft, often in groups of less than eight, in order to give the appearance of private tourist travel. Kim speculated that Mongolia and Russia would be very cautious about the proposed USG refugee initiative. Probably, Kim said, the GOM could very well decide to shut down the refugee flow, which would have disastrous consequences.

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CONCERNED ABOUT PUBLICITY

¶4. (C) DG Kim urged that UNHCR be given a greater role in the American proposal, because the first case of a North Korean refugee resettled to the United States would generate much media attention. The resulting publicity could turn up pressure on host governments to avoid further provoking North Korea. It could also lead to the disclosure of South Korean and NGO efforts to protect and transport North Koreans, thereby threatening the welfare of the refugees. UNHCR involvement might provide cover for relief efforts by determining the North Korean refugee's free choice and countering the claim that North Koreans were being resettled against their will. Politically, he said, it would be easier for Seoul to assist with identity checks with UNHCR involvement.

¶5. (C) Although Seoul viewed UNHCR as an important player in the issue, Kim said he was unsure whether UNHCR was willing to take on a larger role because it could face problems with host governments. He suggested that U.S. officials have another bilateral meeting with UNHCR before the next round of U.S.-South Korean talks on refugee issues.

¶6. (C) DG Kim thought initial U.S. resettlements of North Koreans would encourage more to seek asylum, especially if they knew that Seoul would take all North Koreans who failed to be eligible for U.S. admission. He reiterated that Seoul indeed would accept any North Korean who was denied admission to the United States. To avoid having many unqualified people apply to the U.S. program, however, he suggested distributing clear criteria to promote more qualified North Koreans candidates. In addition to the criteria in the U.S.-delivered non-paper (ref A), he asked whether having family members or clear job prospects in the United States would be additional criteria for successful relocation to the United States.

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USG: MORE NEEDS TO BE DONE

¶7. (C) Political M/C stressed that Washington was very interested in playing a more active role with North Korean refugees. Congress had repeatedly made it clear that it wanted the USG to facilitate the admission of North Korean refugees to the United States as required by the North Korean Human Rights Act. POL M/C also reminded Kim that the Ambassador had raised the USG North Korean refugee strategy with Foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon (ref C).
VERSHBOW